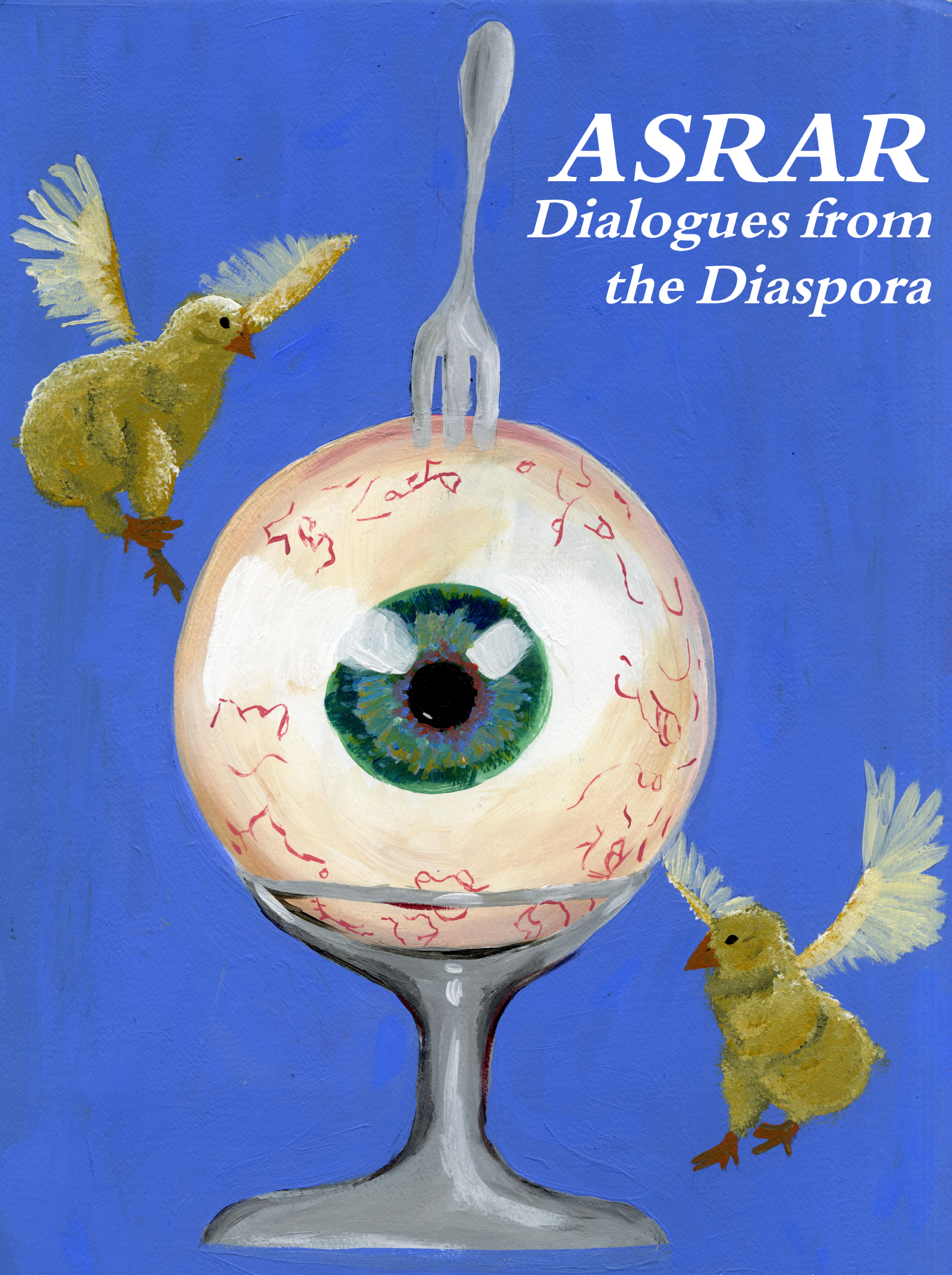
ASRAR

Dialogues from the Diaspora



Issue 12: The Absurd

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Introduction

By Professor Geoffrey Miller, faculty advisor of the English Fellows

Welcome to Issue 12 of ASRAR: Dialogues from the Diaspora. This issue takes up the absurd, a theme that feels close to everyday life whenever our best efforts fail to produce a sensible explanation.

In Maryam Abdulla's "Instructions on How to Hold Water," a simple task becomes an exhausting struggle for control. Hessa Almheiri's "The Department of Unfinished Conversations" gives the search for closure its own bureaucracy, where every attempt to get an answer meets another obstacle. Hiba Faisal takes a lighter approach in "In Defense of Endermen: Why Minecraft's Most Misunderstood Mob Might Just Be Introverted Gardeners." Her argument gives these supposedly menacing creatures a modest ambition: gardening in peace.

Faiza Salahudeen's drawing "The Plumed and the P(h)easants" makes for less comfortable viewing. Birds sit on a wealthy woman's shoulders while others of their species remain caged below. Their apparent ease beside her raises an awkward question: what do we overlook when we benefit from an arrangement?

There is plenty to read beyond the theme, too. Joaquin Thaddeus Dizon's "Two Sides of the Same Coin" considers the life a student might have led had literature won out over a more practical academic path. In "Fragments of War in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad," Mera Abu Zaineh examines how fractured narratives give form to the experience of war. Research on blood bank supply chains and essays addressing racism and language extend the issue's interests further.

On Theme:

The Absurd

Creative Writing

If It Ain't Broke

By: Ali Ziad

Author's Note:

> *Instead of a wild world of incongruity, this story presents a different, quieter kind of absurdity—one we find in ourselves and in others, responsible for all the contradictions which make us human.*
>
> *- Ali Zaid*

"Wrench!" Clint called to Solomon who was kneeling at Clint's waist beside the toolbox"

"Right."

A black hand reached under the car where Clint was lying on his back to hand him the wrench's glimmering silver handle.

"Thanks." Biting his lip, he pushed in the sagging exhaust pipe, aligned it, and tightened the clamp as sweat trickled down his scalp. The pipe stayed fixed in place. He sighed and was about to ask Solomon to roll him out from under the car. The clamp split open. The pipe sank and stopped just an inch from his face.

"Shit!" Solomon hissed. "You okay?"

Clint passed a greasy hand across his forehead. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

"Dammit, Clint. Can't we get that pipe replaced?"

"Fuck that." Clint snapped. "If it ain't broke, don't replace it — and this pipe ain't broke. Besides, I like a car that puts up a fight."

"Whatever." Solomon said. "Anyway, did you hear? Reagan's cutting taxes for the rich. From 70 to 50%, the news said."

"Good."

"What?" Solomon scoffed. "See, this is what I don't get about you. You realize this means less for us, right? And more for the capitalist class?"

"The what?"

"The rich!"

"Good," Clint said again, holding the pipe in place for another try. "They earned their money, didn't they? Why does anyone get to tell them how to spend it?"

"Yeah, they earned it screwing over the rest of us! I know God's got a special place for them in Hell — the bastards."

Clint smiled. "What God?"

He hummed to himself as Solomon's voice spiked and thundered out Bible verses, a vivid image forming in his mind of his young partner's angry expression. By

the time Solomon had reached the part of his sermon about the end times, Clint's phone rang.

"Pull me out!" Clint cried, dropping the wrench.

With an abrupt yank, Clint was looking up at the ceiling lights. He sat up to find a pouting Solomon bringing his wheelchair. "Hold it still." Clint cautioned.

He hauled himself onto it, waved Solomon off to work on the totaled Cadillac, and looked down at his phone. "Damn it." He hissed, and picked up.

"Clint?" Celia said.

"What?"

"Hey! How are you? How's the shop?"

"Dandy. What do you want?"

She paused. "Fine, be like that. Have you signed the papers yet?"

"No. And I'm not planning to."

"Come on, Clint. If it's about the money—"

"What? Hell no! What makes you think I need *your* money?"

"Just last month you—"

"Yeah, I know, I know. Sorry, I just—" He sighed. "It's not the money."

"Come on, Clint, not this again."

"Yes, this again. I'm not signing."

"But it's for your own good!" Celia cried. "How do you still not see that?"

"Who the hell are you to say what's good for me?"

"I'm your sister!"

"Well I'm the one with the missing legs and I ain't broke and I ain't signing shit!"

His voice resounded in the empty garage, trembling along the metal frames of the high walls. Neither of them spoke; the only sound between them was Clint's hoarse, heavy breaths… and then a sigh from Celia. "I'll call again when you've calmed down." She said. "Bye, Clint."

"Yeah." He swallowed. "Yeah, see you."

Clint hung up, but his gaze lingered for a moment on his phone screen, on Celia's name. When he looked away, his eyes were on the Hyundai: its askew fender, cracked rear window, and the sagging exhaust pipe he was working on.

He threw his phone at the car. It smashed through the rear window. The car alarm erupted in wild, metallic cries against the walls and the tail pipe dropped, clattering on the floor under a shower of broken glass.

"Clint!" Solomon cried, rushing into the garage. "Clint! What the hell are you—"

"Get another clamp."

"What?"

"Get another clamp!" Clint spat, lowering himself onto the car creeper. "Don't help me! Get a clamp – I'm fine! The car's fine, just get a new clamp and…it'll fix."

Instructions on How to Hold Water

By: Maryam Abdulla

I am told that control is something you can hold if you close your hands tightly enough. This seems reasonable. Hands are designed for holding. Cups, doors, keys, instruments. I have held all of these successfully. Water should not be different.

I place my hands together and take it in. Immediately, the water leaves me.

This is not my fault. My hands are clearly touching. The gap between them is minimal, almost theoretical. I adjust. I push my palms closer together. I angle my wrists inwards, like parentheses. Still, the water refuses to comply. It slides between my fingers as if my hands are merely an illusion.

I tell myself this is a practice issue. Control is a skill, after all. People acquire it over time. Children are born without it and adults are praised for having it. I must simply be doing it wrong. So, I try again.

I look around for a sign. There is no sign. There is, however, a man standing nearby, holding a clipboard. I ask him how to keep the water still. He looks at my hands, then at the water, then at me. He writes something down. He underlines it and nods once, as if confirming a suspicion. Then he walks away.

His documentation feels insufficient. However, I suspect my insufficiency was the one being recorded. Perhaps, he himself cannot hold the water. This is a comforting thought, though it does not last. The man's incapability to contain water would explain everything, except the part where this is happening to me and not him.

I decide to reason with the water instead. I explain that I need it to stay where it is. I explain that this is important. I explain that I am not asking for much. *Please, Water,* I beg. The water does not respond to my explanations. It continues its work of leaving.

I begin to pace in an orderly fashion, circling the water at a distance neither I nor my shadow can intrude in the water's boundaries. Panic, like control, can be organised if done correctly. Therefore, I make a reasonable list of reasons to remind myself why holding water matters.

1. If I cannot hold water, I cannot hold anything.
2. If I cannot hold anything, I cannot be trusted.
3. If I cannot be trusted, I will be replaced.
4. I do not know what replaces me.

The list is convincing. I am convinced.

I try to contain the water by building rules around it. The water must stay inside my hands. The water must respect boundaries. The water must acknowledge my authority. I say these rules out loud so the water understands them. If I cannot reason with explanations then rules must do it. The water violates all of them at once. See, water has never been much of a rule follower. It consistently chooses the path of least resistance. However, I presumed a little authority will set the water straight. At this point, the situation escalates. I begin to chase the water that has already escaped, attempting to recover it. This proves difficult, as water does not appear to recognise the concept of retrieval. It moves freely, irresponsibly, without any concern for the consequences of its actions. I gather what I can and add it back to my hands. It leaves again. Each attempt produces less water. I am not sure where it goes. I suspect it is reorganising itself somewhere I cannot reach.

My arms grow tired. This is unexpected. I did not account for this. Control, I assumed, would be liberating. Instead, it requires constant maintenance. I cannot look away. The water consumes me. I cannot relax my grip. The moment I do, everything resumes its natural state, which appears to exclude me.

I begin to negotiate.

I tell the water it can leave later. I tell it I will let it go eventually. I tell it I just need a little more time. The water leaves immediately, offended by the delay.

The harder I grasp for control, the more it escapes me; slipping through my fingers like it has done before. In the scramble, chaos takes over. This feels like a betrayal, though I cannot identify who has betrayed whom.

People begin to pass by. They glance at my hands. Some of them nod sympathetically. Others shake their heads. One person suggests I use a container.

I am insulted by this suggestion. A container implies separation. It implies admitting that my hands are insufficient. I am not ready to accept this. Still, I consider it. I imagine a container large enough to hold all the water. Then I imagine another container to hold the first one, in case it fails. Then another. This becomes overwhelming quickly. Containers multiply. I cannot manage them all. I drop the idea like the water that drops from me.

My hands are shaking now. Not violently, NEVER violently—just enough to worsen the problem. I attempt to stabilise myself by focusing on my breathing. Inhale. Exhale. I breathe in the shape of a container I will never use—four in, four hold, four out, four hold, repeat. The water times its escape between breaths. It does not appear interested in the structure.

I notice that my hands are becoming wrinkled. I think to myself that the grooves in my fingers is evidence that there once was water in the cusp of my hands. Or, have I been trying long enough that my hands have aged? This seems excessive for a task that has not been completed. The rest of my body remains inexplicably youthful. Time, it seems, has been selective? No, this weakens the second theory.

I wonder, briefly, what happens if I stop. This thought is dangerous, so I dismiss it.

Instead, I try a new approach: I pretend I already have control. "Fake it till you make it," they say. I stand straight with my chest puffed and my shoulders high. I hold my empty hands as if they are full. I smile at passersby. I say, "Everything is fine."

This works momentarily and for a second, I almost believe it. Then I notice there is no water left. This is worse than before. Before, at least, I was failing at something. Now there is nothing to fail at. My hands remain cupped out of habit. They do not know what else to do.

I lower them slowly. Nothing happens. My hands are now open and so very still.

The chaos does not rush in. The ground does not open and swallow me whole. The water does not return. There is only an absence where effort used to be.

I feel lighter, which is alarming. I check myself for leaks. I am unsure what I am checking for. One moment I am trying. The next moment there is nothing.

Eventually, there is nothing left to control. Eventually, there is nothing left of me.

In Defense of Endermen: Why Minecraft's Most Misunderstood Mob Might Just Be Introverted Gardeners

By: Hiba Faisal

Abstract

Endermen are commonly characterized as hostile and unsettling entities within Minecraft. However, this interpretation may overlook several behavioral patterns inconsistent with indiscriminate aggression. This paper proposes the Gardener Hypothesis, which suggests that Endermen may be better understood as introverted landscaping practitioners with strong interpersonal boundaries. Evidence considered includes their preference for transporting natural blocks, relocation rather than consumption of materials, generally passive behavior toward players, environmental practices, and observed construction-related activity. Additional evidence from Minecraft: Story Mode is considered through the case of Soren, who successfully lived among an Enderman population. Collectively, these observations suggest that the Enderman's reputation may warrant reconsideration.

1. Introduction

Endermen have historically occupied an unsettling position within the Minecraft ecosystem. They are unusually tall, possess the ability to teleport, produce distinctive vocalizations, and may become hostile following prolonged eye contact. Consequently, players commonly interpret Endermen as intimidating or dangerous creatures. However, this interpretation may warrant reconsideration. After years of observing Enderman behavior, this paper proposes an alternative hypothesis: Endermen are not terrifying creatures. They are introverted gardeners. This study examines several behavioral characteristics in support of the Gardener Hypothesis, including Endermen's selection and relocation of natural blocks, generally non-aggressive behavior, sensitivity to prolonged eye contact, unusually sustainable transportation practices, and apparent participation in construction activities.

2. Evidence of Landscaping Behavior

Perhaps the strongest evidence supporting the Gardener Hypothesis is the Enderman's unusual selection of materials. Endermen are frequently observed carrying dirt, grass blocks, sand, and flowers. Notably, these materials are commonly associated with landscaping and environmental modification rather than economic value.

Endermen do not appear particularly interested in diamond blocks, gold blocks, or other valuable resources. This raises an important question: if an Enderman's primary objective is destruction, why is it carrying a flower?

Furthermore, Endermen do not consume the blocks they collect. Instead, they relocate them. An Enderman may collect a block, disappear, and subsequently place it somewhere else. Such behavior is arguably less consistent with destruction than with unauthorized landscape architecture. Perhaps every Enderman is simply pursuing an individual artistic vision. Perhaps the End itself represents one enormous landscaping project that players have mistakenly classified as a dimension.

3. Analysis of Enderman Aggression

Another commonly cited argument against the Gardener Hypothesis concerns Enderman aggression. However, comparison with conventionally hostile mobs reveals an important behavioral distinction. Zombies attack players on sight. Skeletons attack players on sight. Creepers approach players and explode. Endermen, by contrast, frequently remain within close proximity to players without initiating conflict.

Their most notable trigger is prolonged eye contact. This behavior should perhaps be considered from the Enderman's perspective. Imagine peacefully tending to a landscaping project while carrying a flower, only for an unfamiliar individual to approach and stare directly into your eyes. The Enderman may attempt to disengage, yet the player continues staring. Under such circumstances, its eventual hostility may represent less an act of aggression than an unusually forceful enforcement of personal boundaries.

This interpretation becomes particularly compelling when water is introduced. Players may stare at an Enderman, approach it, and subsequently throw water at it. The Enderman then becomes distressed—and is nevertheless classified as the aggressor. One must therefore ask: would the average player remain calm if a stranger threw a bucket of water at them?

4. Environmental Sustainability

The environmental implications of Enderman behavior also deserve consideration. Endermen regularly interact with natural materials, relocate vegetation, and avoid the widespread extraction of resources commonly performed by players. Their primary transportation mechanism—teleportation—also requires no observable vehicles or fossil fuels. Their direct transportation-related carbon emissions may therefore reasonably be described as negligible.

Players, meanwhile, routinely mine mountains, remove forests, drain bodies of water, and reshape entire ecosystems in pursuit of resources. Yet within conventional interpretations of *Minecraft*, the Enderman remains the dangerous one. This discrepancy warrants further investigation.

5. Human-Enderman Relations

Existing interpretations of Endermen predominantly examine interactions from the player's perspective. A more complete analysis should consider the same encounter from the Enderman's perspective.

Consider the arrival of an average player. The individual begins by punching trees with their bare hands, excavates enormous sections of terrain, constructs unfamiliar structures, enters other dimensions, slays a dragon, and subsequently approaches an Enderman and stares directly into its eyes. Under these circumstances, avoidance may constitute an entirely rational response. The Enderman's apparent position can perhaps be summarized most efficiently as: “No thank you.”

6. Case Study: Soren and Enderman Society

Further evidence can be obtained from *Minecraft: Story Mode*. While most individuals avoid or fight Endermen, Soren adopts a markedly different approach: he lives among them. His use of an Enderman suit allows him to observe their behavior while minimizing disruption, functioning—albeit unconventionally—as a form of participant observation. Particularly significant is the Endermen's reaction when Jesse interferes with a structure they are creating. Their response indicates not random aggression, but apparent concern regarding disruption to an ongoing construction activity.

From their perspective, the sequence of events is relatively straightforward. A stranger arrives disguised as a member of their community and immediately interferes with ongoing works. The Endermen respond much as any reasonable construction team might respond when an unauthorized individual enters an active worksite. These observations provide additional support for the possibility that Endermen do not merely wander aimlessly through their environment. They may instead engage in organized creative or construction-related activity.

7. Discussion

Taken together, these observations complicate the conventional classification of Endermen as inherently hostile creatures. Their preference for natural materials is

consistent with landscaping behavior; their movement of blocks indicates relocation rather than indiscriminate destruction; their aggression frequently occurs following specific boundary violations; and their interactions in *Minecraft: Story Mode* suggest an interest in construction and social organization.

None of these observations conclusively prove the Gardener Hypothesis. Further longitudinal research into Enderman landscaping practices would be necessary. Nevertheless, the available evidence raises sufficient doubt regarding the traditional Monster Hypothesis to justify continued investigation.

8. Conclusion

Perhaps Endermen are not monsters. Perhaps they are quiet creatures attempting to improve the world one block at a time. Perhaps they are solitary because they enjoy their own company. Perhaps they carry flowers because they appreciate beauty. And perhaps their hostility emerges primarily when their boundaries are ignored.

After years of being characterized as one of *Minecraft's* most unsettling creatures, the Enderman may simply have been asking players for a little personal space. Therefore, the next time an Enderman is observed carrying a flower across a field, one should at least consider the possibility that they are not witnessing a monster.

They may simply be witnessing an introverted gardener on the way to their next landscaping project. And if the Enderman happens to look away when eye contact is made, perhaps the academically responsible course of action is to look away too.

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Keep it Cool

By: Earielle Pimentel Capili

Maria and her mom used to store milk and vegetables in my belly. I don't know what changed, but these days I keep bony meat sticks fresh. I smell rotten from the inside.

The calendar stuck on my body was her mother's. Maria doesn't have it in her to replace it. It showed her mom's daily shifts at the beauty parlor from years back. With her mom being held up at work every single night, there was nothing for her to do but browse the nail polish catalogs that her mom kept on the kitchen counter. Whenever her mother was home, Maria liked watching her mother paint her nails. She would sit on the kitchen counter and let Maria hold each finger while her polish dried.

Somewhere in between then and now, her passion for color transformed into an obsession for those slender, meaty, and flexible little sticks that I once saw her mom use to wipe her tears with. Gradually, I would see her pupils get bigger as she caressed those catalog pages. She looked... ravenous?

Though Maria never bothers to clean my belly nowadays, I'm proud of her. I remember the day her mom fell to the floor in front of me. Maria cried and stayed close to the unmoving body for 7 whole days. I was exhausted for her, and I was worried that nobody would use me ever again. On the 8th day, Maria opened me, but saw nothing. She said, "Mommy, I'm hungry."

Then, my brave little girl took a knife and sawed away at those hands. Those hands that clothed her, fed her, and provided for her. I realized how strong she was. Her mom's hands looked similar to the ones from the magazine. Pretty and polished. Appetizing. She satisfied her cravings with the hands that had once cared for her. She fed herself.

From the 9th day onwards, Maria came home with more of those juicy sticks. They were never wrapped. They left stains on my shelves. I wish I could follow her out there and see how she buys them. They're not encased in anything either, not like the chicken breast that her mom used to get.

I miss Maria's mom because she kept me tidy. If I had a choice, I would prefer to keep pleasant-smelling food inside my belly. Maria's behaviour is starting to concern me. But since I'm just a refrigerator, I don't have a choice but to keep it cool.

The Department of Unfinished Conversations

By: Hessa Almheiri

"Applicants who drowned before their number was called would be required to reschedule."

Scarlet reread the warning on the wall as water leaked from the ceiling and gathered around the legs of her chair. She sat with her legs crossed, her heel tapping impatiently against the ceramic floor. The water had already risen above her ankles, but no one in the waiting room appeared concerned.

Across from her, a man held an unanswered marriage proposal on a leash. It trembled beneath his chair, occasionally baring its teeth. Beside him, an elderly woman whispered into a glass jar labelled "THINGS MY HUSBAND ALMOST SAID."

Scarlet looked down at the ticket clenched in her hand: number 404. The red display above the receptionist's desk announced that they were now serving number three.

She had been waiting for six years.

Scarlet tightened her fingers around the puzzle piece in her palm. For six years, she had tried to force it into the puzzle box resting on her lap. She had turned it sideways, upside down and backwards. She had pressed hard enough to bend its edges. It never fit.

The picture on the box showed Scarlet, her husband and their daughter seated around the dinner table on the night of the argument. Her daughter had been ten in the picture. She was now sixteen. Her husband's chair remained empty.

Scarlet knew why they had fought. What she did not know was why Richard had packed a suitcase before sunrise, moved away and never returned. According to the letter she had received from the Department of Unfinished Conversations, his missing explanation had been located. To claim it, she only had to prove that the puzzle piece belonged to her.

A bell rang.

"Four hundred and four." Scarlet looked at the display. It still read three.

"Four hundred and four," the receptionist repeated, sounding irritated. "Request for Explanation of Spousal Disappearance." Every face in the waiting room turned towards Scarlet. Even the marriage proposal stopped growling.

She stood and lifted the puzzle box from her lap. At its centre was a single empty space, too small for the piece in her hand and too large for anything else. As she

approached the desk, the water followed her. It curled around her ankles like an obedient animal, leaving the rest of the waiting room perfectly dry. The receptionist had no mouth. A brass plaque identified her as "MRS VANCE, SENIOR OFFICER OF THINGS LEFT UNSAID." When she spoke, her voice came from the locked filing cabinet behind her.

"Puzzle piece." Scarlet placed it on the desk.

Mrs Vance examined it without touching it. "Damaged."

"I've had it for six years."

"That is not what I said."

"It came like that."

"They all say that." A drawer opened behind her and released a tired sigh. "Do you have proof that the damage occurred before it entered your possession?" Mrs Vance asked.

"My husband gave it to me when he left."

"Then you will need his signature."

"If I could ask him for his signature, I wouldn't be here."

The filing cabinet fell silent. Mrs Vance slid a thick bundle of forms across the desk. "That is a separate department."

Scarlet stared at the forms. "Can't you tell me why he left?"

"I can tell you that a reason exists."

"What is it?"

"That information is confidential."

"It is my unfinished conversation."

"That has not yet been established." Mrs Vance opened the lowest drawer of her desk and removed a telephone that appeared to be alive. A human ear grew from one end of the receiver and a closed mouth from the other. Its cord trailed behind it like an umbilical cord, although it was connected to nothing.

"There is one remaining method of verification," she said.

"What method?"

"Remain silent." Mrs Vance pressed one finger to the telephone's ear and whispered something Scarlet could not hear. The mouth at the opposite end twitched. Its lips parted, revealing a row of small, nervous teeth.

Somewhere far away, a telephone began to ring. After the fourth ring, the mouth inhaled. "Hello?"

Scarlet stopped breathing.

The voice was older and quieter than she remembered, but it was his. She recognized the slight roughness in his throat and the cautious way he stretched the first syllable when answering an unfamiliar number. Six years had passed, yet her body knew his voice before her mind could give it a name.

"Richard?"

The mouth snapped shut so violently that it bit through its own tongue. Mrs Vance calmly returned the bleeding telephone to the drawer.

"Verification unsuccessful."

"You called him."

"I did no such thing."

"That was my husband."

Mrs Vance looked towards the display above her desk. It still read three. "Your husband is not present in this building."

"I heard his voice."

"You heard a voice."

"His voice."

"Voices often resemble other voices. That is why the Department does not accept them as proof of identity."

Scarlet turned towards the waiting room. "You all heard him. He answered. He said hello."

The man holding the marriage proposal lowered his eyes. The elderly woman pressed the jar against her chest. No one spoke. Mrs Vance pulled another form from beneath her desk. "Auditory Misidentification Following Prolonged Abandonment," she read. "Very common."

Scarlet struck both hands against the desk. The water around her ankles surged upwards and splashed across its surface. "You called Richard."

Mrs Vance remained still. "There is no record of a telephone call."

"I watched you make it."

"You watched me open a drawer."

Scarlet lunged towards the filing cabinet, but two security officers emerged from the water and seized her arms. "Let me speak to him!"

Mrs Vance stamped "CASE CLOSED" across every page of Scarlet's file. "The person you claim answered the telephone does not exist." The security officers dragged Scarlet through the waiting room. She kicked at the water and screamed Richard's name, but the other applicants refused to look at her. By the time she reached the exit, the water had climbed to her waist.

The Department sent her home at six that evening.

At two in the morning, someone knocked on her front door. Scarlet woke on the sofa and pulled on her robe. Her hair was still wound around pink rollers, and one side of her face carried the imprint of a cushion.

The knocking came again, three slow, deliberate taps.

Mrs Vance stood on the doorstep. She looked smaller without her desk. Water dripped from the hem of her grey uniform, although the street behind her was completely dry. Her voice came from Scarlet's mailbox.

"How did you find my house?" Scarlet asked.

Mrs Vance glanced towards the dark windows of the neighbouring homes. "The Department knows where every unfinished conversation lives." From her coat pocket, she removed a small white envelope. "I could lose my position for this," she whispered. "Possibly my mouth."

"You don't have a mouth."

"Exactly." She pressed the envelope into Scarlet's hands. Inside were five puzzle pieces, each a different colour and shape. "One of these may fit," Mrs Vance said. "If it does, you will receive the certified reason for your husband's disappearance."

"And the others?"

"Other people's reasons."

Before Scarlet could ask anything else, Mrs Vance stepped backwards into the darkness. The streetlight blinked. For one second, Scarlet could see her standing at the end of the driveway. When the light returned, she was gone. Scarlet locked the door and carried the pieces into the kitchen. The first almost fit. She pushed it into the empty space, but one corner rose above the picture. She turned it sideways and pushed again. Nothing. The second piece was too small. The third had six sides. The fourth was soft and warm, like something alive. The fifth whispered whenever Scarlet brought it close to the box, although she could never understand what it was saying. She worked until sunrise.

At breakfast, Sadie found her mother sitting at the kitchen table with the puzzle box open before her. "Did you sleep?"

"One of them fits," Scarlet said. "Mrs Vance promised."

"Who?"

Scarlet did not answer.

By the third night, she had stopped changing her clothes. By the fifth, she had stopped eating anything that required both hands. On the seventh, Sadie woke to the sound of wood splitting downstairs. Scarlet had begun cutting the pieces.

"If they don't fit," Sadie said carefully, "maybe they aren't supposed to."

Scarlet looked up. Her eyes were red, and fragments of cardboard clung to her robe. "That is what they want me to think."

"Who?"

"The Department."

On the tenth morning, Sadie found her mother beneath the kitchen table. The puzzle box lay overturned beside her. Scarlet was forcing one piece against another, repeating Richard's name each time their edges failed to meet.

Sadie crouched in front of her. "Mom, Mrs Vance never came here."

Scarlet laughed. "You were asleep."

Sadie placed her phone on the floor between them. Their doorbell camera showed the entire night: the empty driveway, the silent street and Scarlet opening the front door at exactly two in the morning. No one stood on the other side. On the recording, Scarlet listened to the empty doorstep. She nodded several times. Then she reached into the pocket of her own robe, removed a white envelope and thanked the darkness.

Scarlet watched the recording twice. "That isn't what happened."

Sadie opened the envelope lying on the table. It was one of Richard's old envelopes, taken from the box in Scarlet's bedroom. The five puzzle pieces had been cut from the family portrait on the lid. One contained Richard's hand. Another contained part of his empty chair. The smallest contained Sadie's face at ten years old.

"Mom," Sadie whispered, "there was nobody there."

A telephone began ringing inside the puzzle box. Scarlet reached for the lid. Sadie caught her wrist.

"Can't you hear it?" Scarlet asked.

Sadie heard nothing. She opened the box before her mother could stop her. Inside, there was no telephone and no missing explanation, only the five pieces Scarlet had cut from the family portrait herself.

Visual Media

Without the Skin Organ

By: Lana Al-Shaikhli

Upon seeing the issue's theme, my mind went to a computer game I once played as a kid. I can never remember its name, but I remember my frustration with its primitive functionality. The commands were incomprehensible: Press the left arrow to move right, press W to drop your tool, press Enter to change the patient. The whole purpose of the game was to act as a dentist for regular-looking patients, and as you advanced, their heads began to peel away. An educational game, I would guess now.

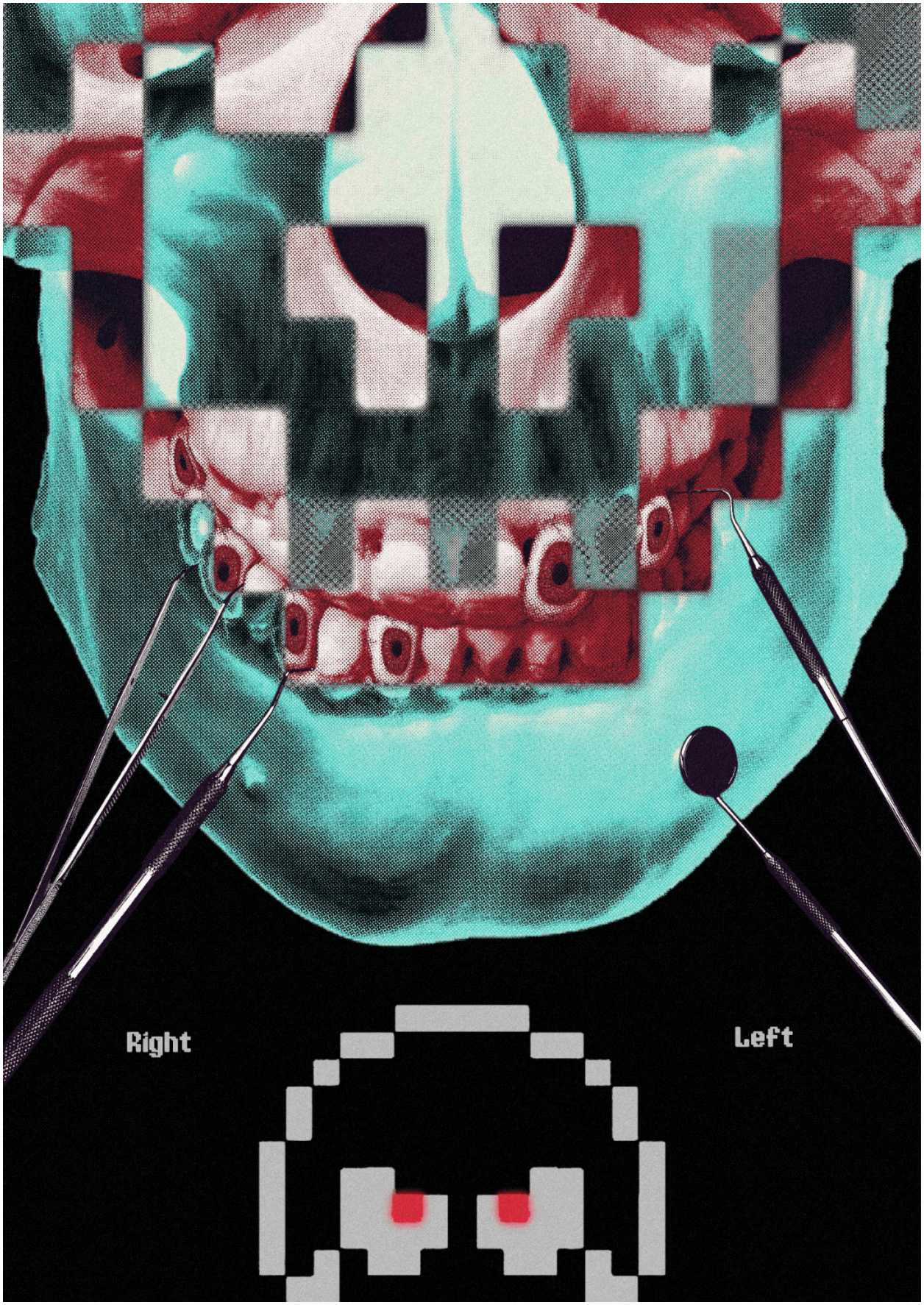
There was also no winning in this game. That aspect in particular frustrated me. After all, how could I prepare for medical school if I couldn't measure my skill? My mother would be disappointed.

The skeleton groans at me as I accidentally scrape his teeth. I hit what I thought were his gums, but ended up on his upper lip. Without the skin organ, we are all vulnerable.

My mother would regularly show me pictures of her holding newborn babies. A gynecologist does not fear the internal body. She may even feel bored by it.

My finger brushes past my exposed gums. Two of my teeth had fallen out within one week. She tells me it is a part of growing up and that she will take me to the dentist to check the inflammation.

I look at the dentist, and he scrapes his tool past my teeth, my nose, my cheek, all one and the same. I groan, and he looks at me, confused. I guess he had never played that game as a kid.


Right
Left

The Plumed and the P(h)easants

By: Faiza Salahudeen

This drawing shows an ultra-wealthy woman draped in luxury and jewelry, wearing a gown made of feathers. Around her is a flock of birds. Some are locked in cages, others perch on top of them, helpless, and a few sit calmly on her shoulders.

The woman's gown, stitched from the plumage of the creatures she confines, is grotesque, but it is at least honest about who benefits from the system. The absurdity lies with the birds on her shoulders, who fail to consider that the trapped are their own kind.

All the birds belong to one species. The difference between the caged and the birds on her shoulders is negligible, yet the latter choose to ignore it. They perch beside power, admire it and defend it, living as though the bars will never reach them. It is a comfortable denial.

A few free birds refuse this illusion. They keep their distance from the woman and stand beside the caged, recognizing how thin the line between freedom and captivity really is, and choosing solidarity over comfort.

Through this scene, the piece asks why so many people choose to look away from what they so plainly resemble. The cage is visible to everyone, yet many still believe it was never built for them.



What Are Monsters?

By: Faiza Salahudeen

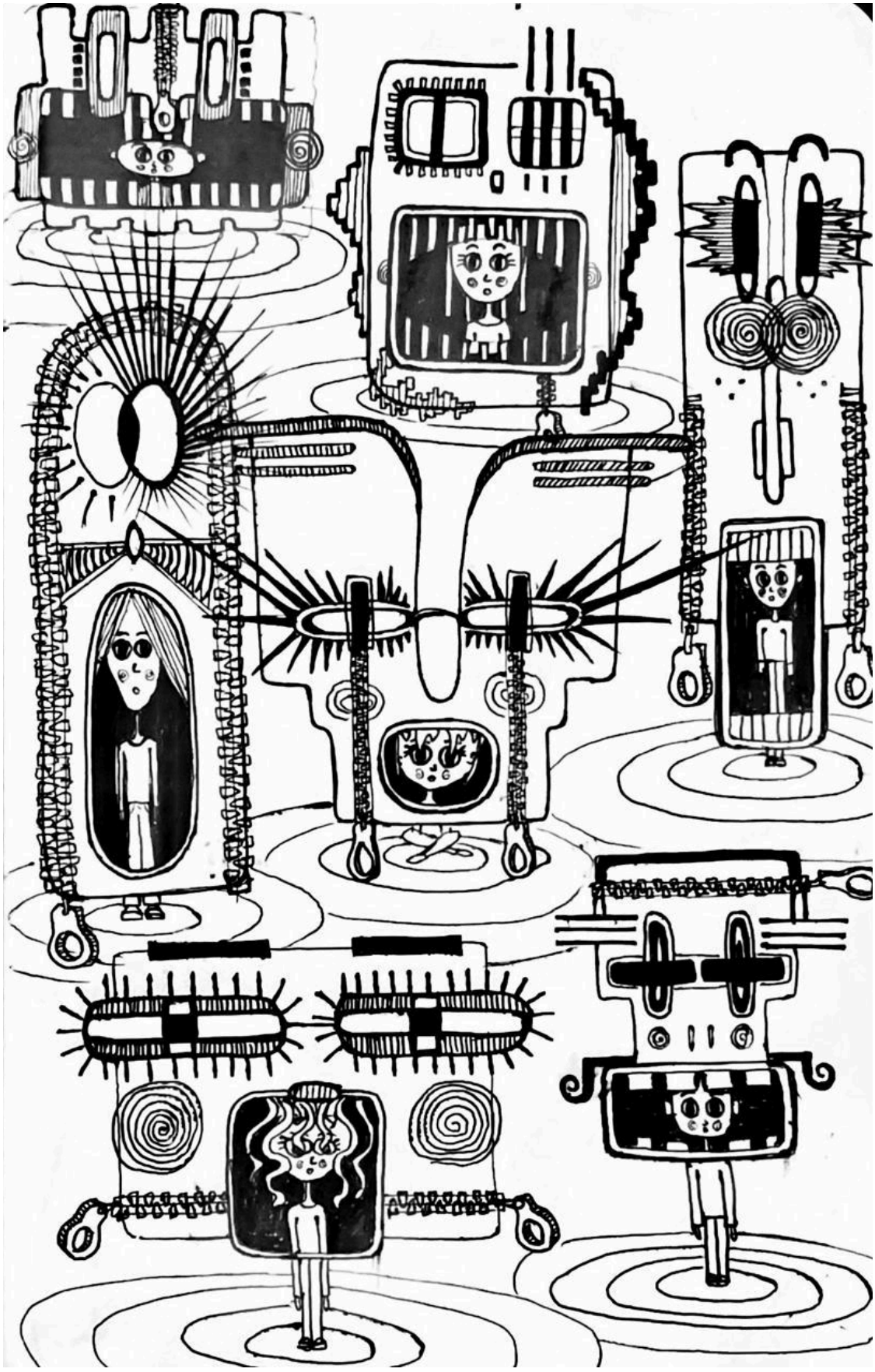
At first glance, this page is crowded with monsters. Teeth are bared, eyes stare, and each creature seems to have swallowed a person whole. But the people inside do not look like victims or villains. Their faces are confused and innocent, as if they are waiting to be told what is happening.

Look closer and every monster has a zipper somewhere on its face. These are not creatures but costumes, and costumes imply a wearer, a maker, and an audience. Look closer still and only the people's heads are inside. Their arms and legs hang free. Nothing holds them in, yet none of them leave.

The scene is not frightening so much as absurd: a threat that cannot hold anyone, and captives who do not leave.

The gap between how dangerous the monsters look and how little they actually restrain is where the drawing lives. Who made these costumes? Perhaps monsters are things we build and then forget we built. Perhaps they are inventions, frightening only because a story told us to be afraid. Or perhaps the monster and the person inside are the same, separated by a zipper that has been within reach all along.

The drawing ends before anyone decides.



An Absolutely Normal, Even Boring, Pirate Day

By: Iana Shvachkova




What the...
What is going on?! Who are you? What am I do-
I'm the Captain of this ship and Your Majesty is-
...Princess Kiya?
BLAAARGH
I didn't anticipate that princesses could be THIS ugly...
...
...Are you mental...?
...My bad your Majesty! I didn't mean to say it out loud
What are you on about?! I'm clearly not a princess. I'm an alchemist!
And I'm not ugly
SHUSH! Don't make a scene!
Nah, you're ugly as hell
How dare you shush me, you stinky jerk ?!!
Now what? You'll make me walk the plank, won't you?
What? No, I will simply put you on the nearest island
Oh, how generous. Cheers.
God... When was the last time you cleaned this place? Last century or something?
It's so dusty, I can barely breathe...
Um...are you alright? Your face is a bit...um...very not normal right now
and you said I was ugly. Look at yourself
ACHOOOOoooo
POOOOF
Santa Maria...Why is this gradually becoming worse?
Don't even say anything
the end
by: Iana Sh.

Chick

By: Mira Alnajjar

The painting “Chick.” symbolizes the war between one’s true self and the way they view themselves. The eye in the middle is meant to symbolize an individual’s true self and an egg, as it is on an eggcup in place of an egg. Likewise, the two chicks surrounding it symbolize the way they view themself. The purpose of having an eye, which depicts an egg, surrounded by two chicks is to show a version of cannibalism, *chicks eating the very thing they are born from*, where an individual eats away at their true self by thinking too lowly of themselves in a self destructive type of way. This defeats an individual's confidence and causes their true personality to die by their own hands as they turn into a version of themselves that they never were originally. The absurdity in this painting lies within the fact that it is meant to depict cannibalism. Cannibalism, in and of itself, is a very absurd concept as it is deemed to be very socially inept and one of the most absurd actions an individual can do. Cannibalism also blurs the line between the consumer and the consumed due to the similarity between the two. Many individuals tend to recognize versions of themselves, whether they may be true depictions or not, in the people around them. Eating another individual of the same species, with so many similarities to oneself, can feel like this form of self-destruction.



Off Theme:

Additional Submissions

Creative Writing

Two Sides of the Same Coin

By: Joaquin Thaddeus Dizon

Reflections hold fascinating truths. In the back row of the late-night bus, you can almost see yourself as you stare out the window. You see not just who you are, but who you could be. The edges of your outline are blurry, like a dream you know you had but can't remember the story of. The haziness and your fatigue blend the lines between real and fiction, and for a moment you can see another life staring back like a mirror image.

It's you. The same eyes, the same nose, the same parted hair. You have the same favorite foods and the same allergies. The same blank stare when your mind's too focused on the music from your headphones.

But it's not you. Your comfortable gray hoodie is replaced by a brown leather jacket. Instead of the physics textbook on your lap, there's a classical anthology with messy, smudged notes in the margins. There's a different air to your reflection, a deep uncertainty coupled with freedom and passion. There's a fire in your eyes you haven't seen in a long time. It scares you to find it there.

You want to look away, but at the same time you don't. You can't. Because in that moment, you know what you're looking at: the life you didn't choose. The other side of a coin you only got to flip once.

There was a point in time where literature was your life. You'd read books in between classes, write stanzas after school would end. In every single moment you lived there was a story waiting to be written by your pen. Your aptitude in science and math was helpful, but you never carried a physics textbook around because you couldn't bear to put it down.

That life feels like a lifetime away now. The spaces between classes that you once filled with books have become time to finish assignments, and the hours after school that once belonged to stanzas disappear somewhere between one deadline and the next.

You always ask everybody what they would do if money didn't matter. Rarely does anyone answer with what they're actually doing now. There's a comfort in the sadness of each confession. To know that you're not the only one with dreams bookmarked on pages you haven't opened in years.

It's hard to regret living the life you live now, but it's also hard to admit that at certain times of the day you can notice your passion slowly getting taken over by mindless routine. Not that there isn't any passion at all, but only that it feels like a whisper compared to what could have been.

The harsh, blue light of the bus fills your reflection with a dull gray undertone, but it doesn't seem to mind. The person that exists only between the window panes is living in his own world, head tilted down to a poem somewhere in the middle of his book. It's nice to see yourself like this. Your reflection doesn't know you're there.

But the bus halts to a stop and instead of seeing yourself outside the window, you see the bright, fluorescent gleam of the guard station on the edge of student housing. The hiss of the door opening brings you back. And you have to spend the rest of the night wondering what you would have done if you'd had the chance to flip a coin for your life again.

Research Papers

Supply Chain Risk Management in Blood Banks

By: Linda Mohamedsalih, Rana Hamdan, Mohammed Hafiz Hamsa, & Kevin Joshy

Supply Chain Risk Management in Blood Banks: Building Resilient Healthcare Supply Chains Through Risk Management and Digital Innovation

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    c. Recent Developments
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4. Benefits and Challenges
5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations
6. Conclusion
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Introduction and Significance

Consider a local hospital trauma unit receiving three critically injured patients simultaneously following a sudden multi-car collision on a major highway. In such high-stress environments, surgeons immediately require several units of O-negative blood, the universal type crucial for emergency resuscitations before crossmatching can occur. However, because of an intense regional heatwave over the preceding weekend that kept public donors indoors, the local blood bank's emergency safety stock is entirely exhausted. In this razor-thin window of clinical care, a logistics delay does not simply mean a back-ordered product or a hit to corporate revenue; it directly dictates patient survival. This acute dilemma highlights why Supply Chain Risk Management (SCRM) within blood bank operations cannot be viewed merely as a bureaucratic exercise in cost control, but rather as an indispensable, life-saving operational framework.

Broadly defined, SCRM involves systematic identification, assessment, and mitigation of operational disruptions and external vulnerabilities to maintain enterprise continuity. In conventional commercial supply chains, these frameworks are heavily leveraged to protect financial margins, smooth out manufacturing cycles, and minimize the holding costs of consumer goods. If a tech firm encounters a microchip stockout, the consequence is a dip in quarterly profits and frustrated consumers tracking delayed parcels. When shifted to a clinical landscape, however, the parameters of risk

fundamentally transform. In healthcare logistics, and specifically within blood banking, the ultimate metric of performance is measured in human lives saved and clinical safety rather than financial profitability.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Blood Safety and Availability frameworks, blood logistics are among the most volatile and unforgiving supply systems in existence today. As explored extensively in past literature, including our group's foundational 2018 review paper, blood possesses several rigid biological and operational characteristics that prevent the use of standard, "one-size-fits-all" commercial inventory models:

- A Non-Manufacturable, Vulnerable Asset: Unlike traditional pharmaceuticals or medical hardware, human blood cannot be synthetically mass-produced or engineered in a factory setting. The entire upstream supply chain depends completely on the unpredictable altruism of voluntary human donors, exposing the network to immediate supply shocks from weather, holidays, or public health crises.
- Perishability and the Wastage Paradox: While regular supply chains can accumulate heavy safety stocks to cushion against disruptions, blood components operate on a strict biological expiration clock. Red blood cells must be transfused within 35 to 42 days, while vital components like platelets expire in a highly restrictive 5 to 7 days. Consequently, over-ordering to prevent a shortage inadvertently triggers a secondary operational failure: catastrophic product spoilage and resource wastage.
- Unpredictable Demand Volatility: Although routine clinical operations can be accurately forecasted using hospital surgical schedules, emergency trauma spikes, natural disasters, and mass casualty events introduce sudden, steep demand curves that can instantly deplete regional stockpiles.
- Uncompromised Cold Chain Mandates: Blood products are highly sensitive to thermal fluctuations. Red blood cells must be kept within a strict 2 degree Celsius to 6 degree celsius window from collection to final transfusion. A single breakdown in refrigeration during transit or storage invalidates the safety of the entire batch, forcing immediate disposal.

Faced with these severe biological constraints, blood bank managers must continuously navigate a delicate operational tightrope between two unacceptable failures: a stockout that threatens patient life, and excess inventory that wastes a scarce, donated human resource.

The primary objective of this report is to answer a central operational question: How can contemporary supply chain risk management frameworks help blood banks minimize shortages, curb waste, and ensure safe, timely delivery to patients? By evaluating emerging digital technologies including AI-driven demand forecasting, Internet of Things (IoT) cold chain tracking, and blockchain-based traceability alongside critical real-world disruptions like the 2024 Synnovis cyberattack, this paper establishes a proactive framework for building highly resilient, agile, and secure blood supply networks.

Literature Review and Recent Developments

Blood Supply Chain Management

Unlike conventional supply chains, blood supply chains operate under highly restrictive conditions where the availability of products can directly determine patient outcomes. Blood products are highly perishable, have limited shelf lives, require strict temperature-controlled storage throughout the cold chain, and cannot be manufactured artificially, making voluntary blood donors the only source of supply. As a result, blood supply chain management (BSCM) involves the seamless coordination of donor recruitment, blood collection, laboratory testing, component processing, storage, inventory management, transportation, and hospital distribution. The primary objective is to ensure that the right blood product is available in the right quantity, at the right location, and at the right time while minimizing shortages, wastage, and operational disruptions. Effective coordination across every stage is therefore essential not only to improve operational efficiency but also to safeguard patient safety and ensure a reliable healthcare service (Mansur et al., 2018; Alghamdi, 2023; WHO, 2025).

Although blood supply chains follow a similar end-to-end structure to other healthcare logistics systems, they are considerably more complex due to the unique characteristics of blood products. Each blood component has specific storage conditions and shelf lives, requiring inventory managers to carefully balance product availability with the risk of expiration. This challenge is further intensified by highly unpredictable demand, which can fluctuate because of emergency surgeries, road traffic accidents, disease outbreaks, natural disasters, and seasonal variations in healthcare needs. As a result, maintaining an adequate blood inventory requires continuous forecasting, real-time monitoring, and rapid decision-making to ensure that life-saving blood products are available when needed without increasing unnecessary wastage (Mansur et al., 2018; Alghamdi, 2023; WHO, 2025).

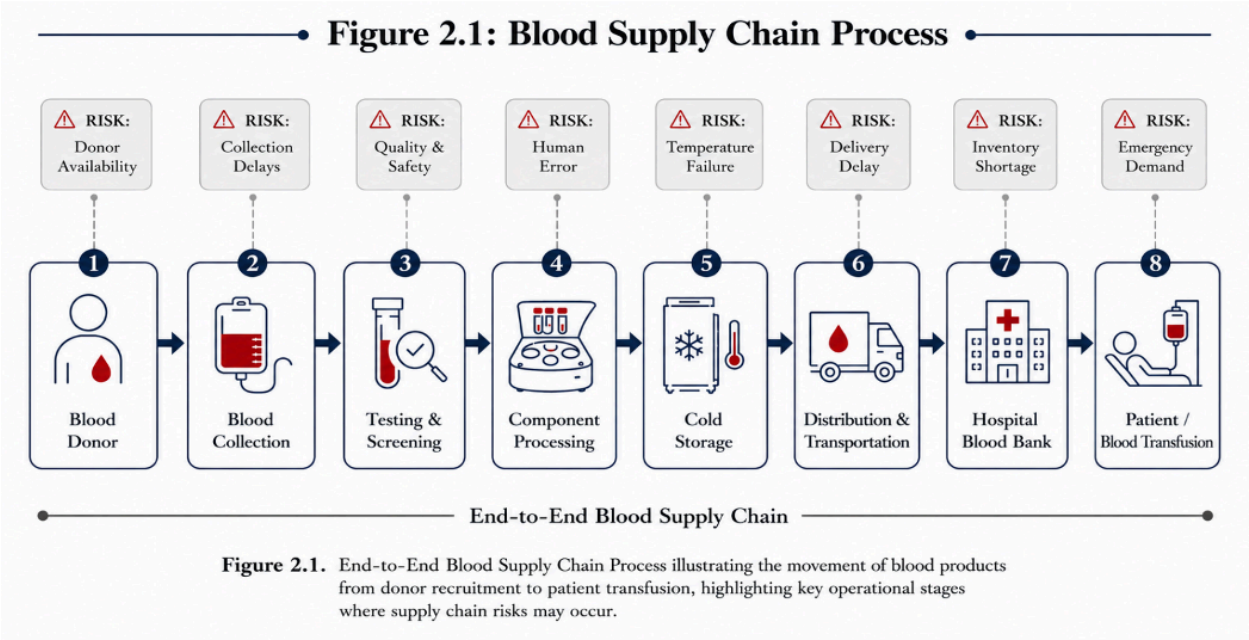


Figure 2.1. End-to-End Blood Supply Chain Process illustrating the movement of blood products from donor recruitment to patient transfusion, highlighting key operational stages where supply chain risks may occur.

Key Challenges in Blood Supply Chains

Maintaining a balance between blood supply and demand remains one of the greatest challenges in blood supply chain management. Blood donation rates fluctuate due to seasonal trends, donor availability, and public health events, while demand can rise unexpectedly because of emergency surgeries, accidents, or natural disasters. Maintaining higher inventory reduces the risk of shortages but increases product expiry, whereas lower inventory improves efficiency but may leave hospitals unprepared during emergencies. Consequently, blood services must continuously balance blood availability, operational costs, and product wastage (Mansur et al., 2018; Alghamdi, 2023; WHO, 2025).

Transportation and distribution are equally critical because blood products require strict cold chain conditions to maintain their quality and safety. Delays, equipment failures, or temperature fluctuations can compromise blood quality and increase operational risks. Therefore, distribution planning must prioritize response time and product integrity alongside transportation cost and distance (Alghamdi, 2023; Stanger et al., 2012).

Another major challenge is the limited coordination between blood collection centres, processing facilities, hospitals, and regulatory authorities. Poor information sharing and fragmented inventory visibility can result in shortages in one location while excess blood expires in another. Strengthening collaboration, centralized inventory management, and real-time information sharing can improve responsiveness and build a more resilient blood supply chain (Mansur et al., 2018; WHO, 2025).

Recent Developments

Recent advances in digital technologies are reshaping blood supply chain management by improving efficiency, visibility, and decision-making. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning are increasingly used to predict blood demand, helping blood banks optimize inventory, reduce wastage, and respond more effectively to changing healthcare needs. Meanwhile, Internet of Things (IoT) sensors enable real-time monitoring of storage and transportation conditions, ensuring blood products remain within safe temperature ranges throughout the cold chain (Alghamdi, 2023; Artificial Intelligence in Blood Donor Management, 2025).

Other emerging technologies, including blockchain, digital inventory platforms, and drone-assisted delivery, are enhancing traceability and distribution, particularly in remote or high-demand areas. At the same time, the World Health Organization (WHO) continues to promote digital reporting systems, stronger governance, and more resilient blood service networks. Together, these innovations are shifting blood banks from reactive inventory management toward predictive, data-driven supply chains that are better prepared to respond to future disruptions (WHO, 2025; Predicting Blood Transfusion Requests Using Machine Learning and Time Series, 2026).

Figure 2.2: Digital Transformation of Blood Supply Chains

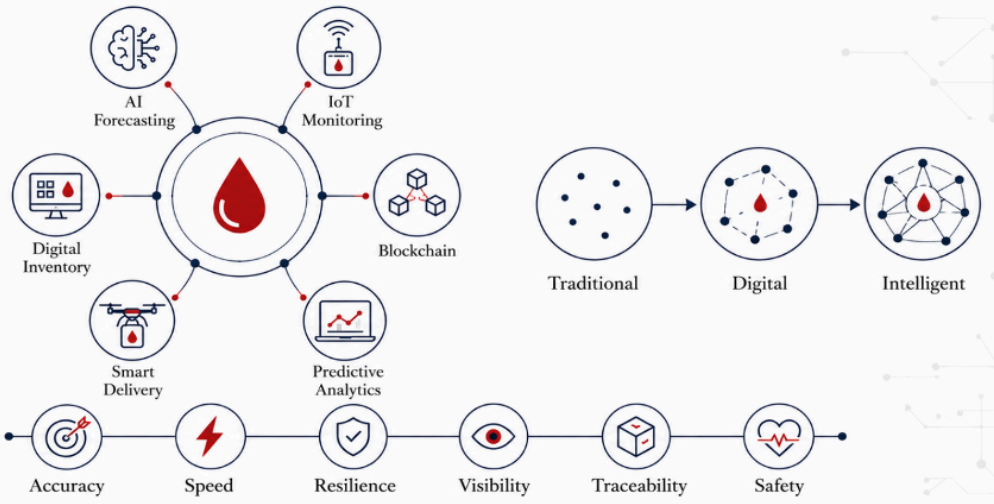


Figure 2.2. Emerging digital technologies transforming blood supply chains by improving forecasting, visibility, traceability, and operational resilience.

Industry Case Study: OneBlood Ransomware Attack

Blood banks rely on supply chain risk management (SCRM) frameworks to reduce shortages, minimize waste, and ensure blood reaches patients safely and on time. The OneBlood ransomware attack demonstrates how these frameworks become essential when critical supply chain operations are disrupted.

In July 2024, OneBlood, a nonprofit organization supplying blood products to more than 350 hospitals across the southeastern United States, experienced a ransomware attack that disrupted its critical software systems. The attack affected inventory management, donor records, blood labeling, and distribution processes. Although blood collection and testing continued, many activities had to be completed manually, significantly slowing processing and deliveries. As a result, hospitals activated emergency blood shortage protocols, postponed some non-urgent procedures, and introduced blood conservation measures while additional blood supplies were sourced from partner blood centers (CBS News, 2024; OneBlood, 2024).

Table 1

Lessons Learned from the OneBlood Ransomware Attack

SUPPLY CHAIN RISK	POTENTIAL IMPACT	SCRM RESPONSE
Cyberattack	Loss of digital operations and disrupted blood distribution	Business continuity plans, manual operations, cybersecurity response
Inventory system failure	Slower inventory allocation and blood distribution	Manual tracking and priority allocation
Donor shortages	Reduced emergency blood stock	Urgent donor campaigns and inventory replenishment
Unexpected demand spike	Risk of blood shortages for critical patients	Blood conservation protocols and demand prioritization
Regional supply disruption	Uneven blood availability between hospitals	Inventory sharing through the AABB Disaster Task Force and partner blood centers

From an SCRM perspective, the attack demonstrates how cyber threats can quickly become supply chain risks. Before the incident, OneBlood relied on digital systems to monitor inventory, coordinate donor information, and manage blood distribution. Although the cyberattack itself could not have been predicted, demand forecasting, emergency stock planning, and cyber risk assessments help blood banks prepare for disruptions before they occur. Secure data backups, employee training, and tested business continuity plans can also reduce operational disruption, while digital inventory systems support product traceability, cold chain monitoring, and inventory rotation to minimize waste.

During the attack, OneBlood implemented several risk management strategies to maintain operations. Manual procedures allowed blood collection, testing, and distribution to continue, preventing a complete interruption of the blood supply despite slower processing times. Hospitals activated blood conservation protocols to prioritize emergency patients, while the AABB Disaster Task Force coordinated additional blood supplies from regional blood centers. OneBlood also launched urgent donor campaigns to rebuild inventory, particularly for O-positive, O-negative, and platelet donations. Together, these coordinated actions increased supply flexibility, reduced shortages, and ensured that available blood was directed to patients with the greatest clinical need.

Following the incident, the case highlighted the importance of integrating cybersecurity into broader supply chain risk management rather than treating it as a separate IT issue. As shown in Table 1, resilient blood supply chains depend on both digital and operational preparedness. By identifying risks early, strengthening collaboration, maintaining contingency plans, and improving inventory visibility, blood banks can better reduce shortages, minimize waste, and ensure blood reaches patients safely and on time.

Modern Blood Supply Chain Management (BSCM) operates within a high-stakes, time-sensitive ecosystem where matching volatile medical demand with fluctuating donor supply is critical. By integrating digital innovations like Machine Learning (ML) forecasting and multimodal logistics, blood banks can transition from reactive, vulnerable networks to resilient, data-driven supply chains. This report provides a structured, comparative analysis of the operational benefits and systemic challenges associated with modernized supply chain risk management.

Benefits and Challenges

Modern Blood Supply Chain Management (BSCM) operates within a high-stakes, time-sensitive ecosystem where matching volatile medical demand with fluctuating donor supply is critical. By integrating digital innovations like Machine Learning (ML)

forecasting and multimodal logistics, blood banks can transition from reactive, vulnerable networks to resilient, data-driven supply chains. This report provides a structured, comparative analysis of the operational benefits and systemic challenges associated with modernized supply chain risk management.

Table 2

Comparative Matrix: Benefits vs. Challenges in Modern BSCM

FOCUS AREA	STRATEGIC BENEFITS OF DIGITAL INNOVATION	SYSTEMATIC & STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES
Inventory & Lifespan	**Reduced Wastage:** Integrating ML demand forecasting models increases collected blood volumes by 11% while slashing inventory shelf-life wastage by 20%.	**Blood Expires Quickly:** Blood is an inherently perishable biological product; red blood cells degrade rapidly, imposing non-negotiable time windows on storage and transit.
Predictive Certainty	**Better Forecasting:** Advanced algorithms process historical center data to accurately project real-time demand patterns and predict donor return frequencies.	**Demand Uncertainty:** Emergency trauma surges, seasonal shortages, and localized public health crises create highly volatile, unpredictable demand spikes.
Clinical Integrity	**Improved Patient Safety:** Digital cross-matching, continuous cold-chain tracking, and automated early screening tools radically reduce human error and guarantee product efficacy.	**Kinetic & Thermal Risks:** Blood must stay within a strict 2–6°C range. Road delays threaten this window, while high-speed drone or vehicle vibrations risk causing cell hemolysis.
Financial Dynamics	**Lower Costs:** Optimizing delivery routes and utilizing automated donor communication platforms lowers long-term overhead and cuts expensive emergency procurement.	**Technology Costs:** Implementing advanced platforms requires high capital; drone operations average ~$17.17/minute versus ~$9.00/minute for ground vehicles.
Stakeholder Ecosystem	**Better Collaboration:** Cloud-based tracking platforms break down organizational silos, enabling real-time data synchronization between donor centers, logistics providers, and hospitals.	**Limited Donors:** Recruitment relies on a volatile human pool; predictive models must work hard to overcome high donor attrition and severe demographic selection biases.
Systemic Strength	**Higher Resilience:** Multimodal distribution networks (combining ground vehicles, motorcycles, and drones) allow networks to dynamically reroute during sudden disruptions.	**Cybersecurity & Regulation:** Blood banks are high-priority ransomware targets. Systems must navigate strict clinical regulations while deploying secure, offline-capable AI architecture.

Managerial Implications and Recommendations

Effective supply chain risk management requires blood bank managers to move from reactive decision-making toward proactive planning supported by technology and collaboration. In the short term, organizations should strengthen donor communication through digital campaigns, provide regular staff training on emergency response and cold chain management, and establish clear emergency blood stock policies to improve preparedness during periods of high demand or supply disruption (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025; Mansur et al., 2018).

Over the medium term, blood services should invest in artificial intelligence (AI) for demand forecasting, implement RFID or Internet of Things (IoT) technologies to improve inventory visibility and temperature monitoring, and strengthen regional inventory-sharing agreements between hospitals and blood banks. These initiatives can improve forecasting accuracy, reduce blood wastage, and enhance supply chain coordination (Alghamdi, 2023; Mashaqbeh et al., 2026; Abolghasemi et al., 2025).

In the long term, healthcare organizations should adopt digital twin technology and predictive analytics to simulate supply chain disruptions and support strategic decision-making. Developing a national integrated blood information system would further improve real-time information sharing, resource allocation, and emergency response across healthcare facilities. Collectively, these measures can build a more resilient, efficient, and sustainable blood supply chain capable of responding to future healthcare challenges (WHO, 2025; Torrado & Barbosa-Póvoa, 2022; Meneses et al., 2022).

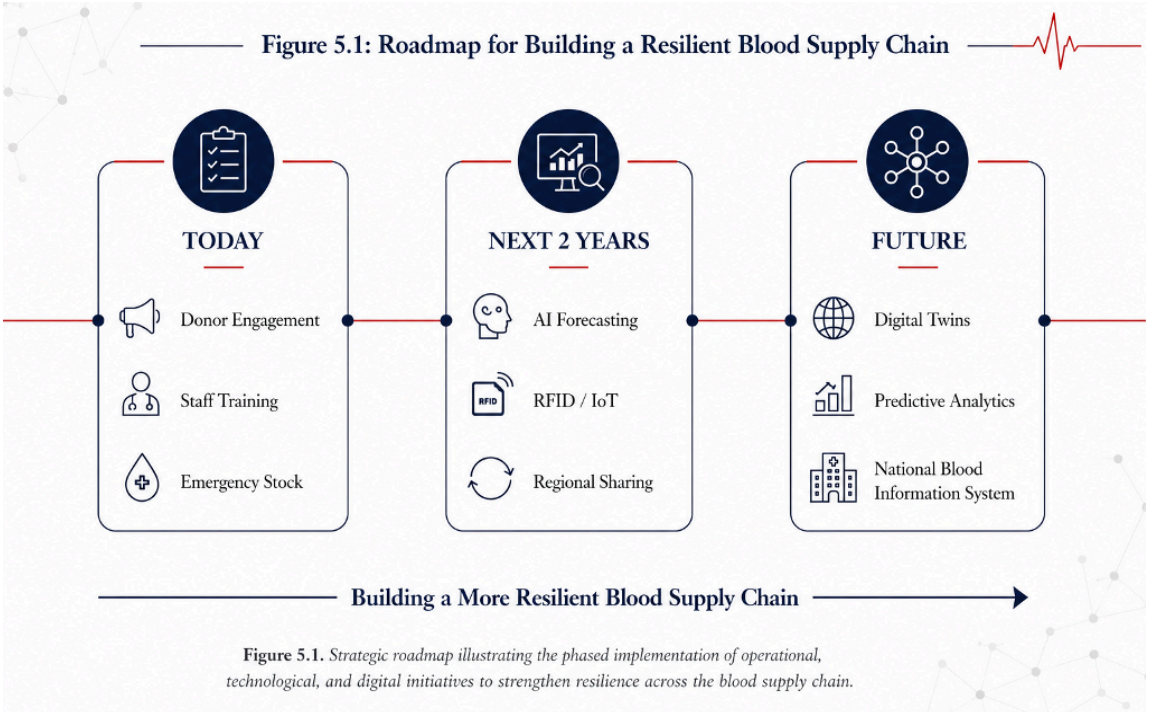


Figure 5.1. *Strategic roadmap illustrating the phased implementation of operational, technological, and digital initiatives to strengthen resilience across the blood supply chain.*

Conclusion

Blood supply chains are among the most complex healthcare supply chains because they rely on voluntary donors, involve highly perishable products, and must respond rapidly to unpredictable demand. This report demonstrates that effective supply chain risk management frameworks play a vital role in reducing shortages, minimizing wastage, and maintaining a safe and reliable blood supply.

Recent advances in AI, predictive analytics, IoT, and integrated information systems are transforming blood bank operations by improving forecasting, inventory management, and decision-making. However, technology alone is not sufficient. Long-term resilience also depends on effective collaboration, strategic planning, and continuous investment in digital capabilities. By adopting proactive risk management practices, blood banks can strengthen their resilience and ensure that life-saving blood products remain available whenever and wherever they are needed (WHO, 2025; Alghamdi, 2023; Mashaqbeh et al., 2026).

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Literary Papers

Fragments of War in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

By: Mera Abu Zaineh

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* opens with a fragmented bureaucratic report: "With regard to the activities of the Tracking and Pursuit Department . . . the special committee of inquiry . . . has come to the following conclusions" (Saadawi 9). From its opening line, the novel resists narrative coherence. Instead, it presents a collage of reports, testimonies, rumours, and contradictory accounts. This fragmented structure reflects not only Saadawi's stylistic choices but also the chaotic reality of post-2003 Iraq, where violence fractures bodies, memories, identities, and social relationships. Rather than offering a stable or authoritative version of events, the novel compels readers to navigate a world defined by uncertainty and contradiction. Although fragmentation is often treated as a hallmark of postmodern literature, its function as a means of representing lived experiences of war demands closer attention. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction and Haytham Bahoora's notion of the "dismembered nation," this essay asks: to what extent is fragmented narration an effective literary strategy for portraying lived war experience in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*? Fragmentation is not merely a stylistic feature of Saadawi's novel; it is structurally essential because it exposes the instability of truth, justice, and identity through bodily dismemberment, metafictional narration, and the disintegration of the social fabric.

Critical discussions of Saadawi's novel consistently emphasise fragmentation as both an aesthetic and political response to war, although they differ in how they understand its function. Bahoora argues that Iraqi war narratives employ an "aesthetic of horror" to represent a "dismembered nation," in which the fragmentation of bodies mirrors the collapse of national identity and coherence (186–88). This reading foregrounds the material consequences of violence while also suggesting that national belonging itself becomes unstable. Similarly, Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction describes postmodern texts as self-reflexive narratives that simultaneously construct and undermine historical knowledge, thereby exposing its partial and contested nature (182–85). From this perspective, fragmentation challenges the authority of official historical narratives. Booker and Daraiseh extend this argument by describing the Whatsitsname as a "Postmodern Prometheus," a figure who embodies competing ethical claims and fractured histories and therefore resists a unified moral interpretation (390). While these scholars establish fragmentation as central to the novel, they tend to

approach it either symbolically, as in Bahoora's analysis, or formally, as in Hutcheon's theory. This essay builds on their arguments by demonstrating that fragmentation operates simultaneously at physical, narrative, moral, and social levels. It is therefore not merely an illustration of the effects of war but a comprehensive strategy for representing its lived experience.

Saadawi's representation of bodily fragmentation, most visibly embodied in the Whatsitsname, develops Bahoora's concept of the "dismembered nation" while extending its implications. The creature is assembled from the body parts of bombing victims and functions as both a literal and symbolic manifestation of national disintegration. As the novel explains, "He was a composite of victims seeking to avenge their deaths . . . he needed to replace the parts that were falling off, so he needed new flesh from new victims" (Saadawi 100). This continuous process of decay and replacement reflects the persistence of violence. It also suggests that attempts to restore wholeness inevitably reproduce further fragmentation. The Whatsitsname's unstable body thus becomes a metaphor for a nation that cannot achieve coherence because it is continually reshaped by new acts of destruction. The creature's body also complicates conventional distinctions between victim and perpetrator. Initially, the Whatsitsname appears to embody the dead victims of violence and to speak on their behalf. His body carries the remains of people whose deaths might otherwise disappear into the anonymous statistics of war. Yet his dependence on new body parts makes him both a product of violence and an agent of further violence. The body that seeks completion can survive only by producing additional loss. Saadawi therefore presents national recovery as an ethically complicated process: the desire to repair the wounds of war may reproduce the conditions that created those wounds in the first place. Through Whatsitsname, bodily fragmentation becomes not only a symbol of national collapse but also a structure of repetition in which violence continually generates more violence.

Saadawi complicates Bahoora's framework further by demonstrating that fragmentation is not confined to the physical body. It also extends into perception, knowledge, and collective memory. The contradictory narratives surrounding the Whatsitsname reveal how fragmented realities produce distorted understandings of truth. This problem appears in the description of Hadi, who is falsely represented as a dangerous criminal: "The stories portrayed him as a dangerous criminal, but really he was nothing like that" (Saadawi 98). The discrepancy between public perception and lived reality illustrates how truth becomes unstable in a context where information is mediated through rumour, fear, and partial knowledge. Mahmoud's response to a letter from his former mentor, Saidi, reinforces this uncertainty: "But what if one percent of

his story were true? Isn't life a blend of things that are plausible and others that are hard to believe?" (Saadawi 200). The question suggests that, in a war-torn society, truth is not easily separated from falsehood. Instead, the plausible and the unbelievable coexist within the same fractured field of experience. This instability affects personal identity as well as collective memory. Characters are repeatedly forced to construct their understanding of events from incomplete and contradictory accounts. They cannot rely on institutions, witnesses, or official records to provide a definitive explanation. As a result, identity becomes dependent on stories that are always subject to revision. Hadi's reputation, for example, is shaped less by his actual character than by the rumours circulating about him. Saadawi thus shows that war destroys not only physical bodies but also the narratives through which individuals and communities recognise one another. Fragmentation actively shapes how people interpret and navigate their reality.

While corporeal fragmentation renders violence visible, Saadawi's fragmented narration more directly engages with Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction by destabilising the possibility of coherent historical representation. The novel is composed of reports, testimonies, rumours, and retellings, preventing the emergence of a single, unbiased narrative. Instead, events become accessible only through multiple and competing perspectives. This is particularly evident in Mahmoud's role as both recorder and interpreter. He is "aware that he was paraphrasing the words that Hadi had attributed to the Whatsitsname . . . adding his own personal gloss as well" (Saadawi 97). This moment makes the process of narration visible. Mahmoud does not simply transmit an original statement; he selects, reshapes, and interprets it. The narrative therefore draws attention to the fact that all accounts are mediated by the perspectives and limitations of those who produce them. Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction exposes the constructed nature of historical knowledge by refusing to present it as objective or complete (185). Saadawi's narrative enacts this principle by presenting competing versions of events that cannot be reconciled into a single coherent account. Even institutional attempts to impose order, such as the bureaucratic report that opens the novel, ultimately fail to provide clarity. The report's official language suggests authority, but its conclusions cannot contain the disorder of the world it attempts to describe. In this way, the novel underscores the inadequacy of official narratives in capturing lived experience. The importance of this technique lies in its effect on the reader. Readers are positioned within the same uncertainty that defines the characters' reality. They must determine what to believe without the guidance of a fully reliable narrator or a final authoritative explanation. Fragmentation therefore becomes more than a representational device: it becomes an immersive experience. Rather than

merely depicting the instability of truth, the novel compels readers to experience that instability for themselves. The form of the novel thus reproduces the epistemological conditions of war, in which people must act and make moral judgments despite incomplete information.

Fragmentation also operates at the level of morality and social structure. It reveals the collapse of stable ethical frameworks and communal bonds. The Whatsitsname, described by Booker and Daraiseh as a "Postmodern Prometheus," initially presents himself as an agent of justice. He declares, "I am the answer to their call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty" (Saadawi 134). His stated purpose appears morally coherent: he will avenge the innocent and punish those responsible for their deaths. Yet this moral logic quickly deteriorates. Because he requires new body parts to survive, he becomes dependent on the continuation of violence that he claims to oppose. His admission, "My face changes all the time . . . nothing in me lasts long, other than my desire to keep going. I kill in order to keep going" (Saadawi 193), reveals the impossibility of sustaining a stable ethical position within a context defined by continuous violence.

The Whatsitsname's transformation demonstrates how justice can become indistinguishable from revenge. He begins by claiming to speak for victims, but his actions gradually reproduce the logic of the perpetrators. His identity is fragmented because his body, motives, and moral status are constantly changing. He is simultaneously a victim, avenger, murderer, and survivor. Saadawi does not allow readers to place him comfortably within a single moral category. Instead, the creature embodies the ethical confusion produced by war, where the boundaries between innocence and guilt, justice and revenge, and victimhood and culpability become increasingly difficult to maintain. This moral instability is mirrored in the fragmentation of social structures, particularly through the displacement of characters such as Elishva and Abu Anmar. As long-standing members of their neighbourhood, these figures represent continuity, memory, and communal identity. Their departures signal the erosion of the stabilising forces that connect individuals to place and to one another. The novel describes the consequences of their absence: "To mark Elishva's departure, Umm Salim staged a major weeping and wailing performance in the lane . . . He said Abu Anmar had left Baghdad, having sold the hotel and gone back to his family in Qalat Sukkar. This came as a surprise to Mahmoud" (Saadawi 227). Elishva's departure is marked by collective mourning, emphasising the emotional significance of her absence. Abu Anmar's quieter exit, by contrast, reflects the normalisation of displacement in a society accustomed to loss. These departures demonstrate that fragmentation is experienced not only through spectacular acts of violence but also through gradual

changes in everyday life. Communities are weakened when familiar people leave, businesses close, and shared routines disappear. The loss of individual members becomes a loss of collective memory. Even when no explosion or physical attack occurs, the social world continues to fragment through migration, fear, and emotional exhaustion. Saadawi therefore represents war as a process that transforms neighbourhoods into unstable spaces in which belonging can no longer be taken for granted. At the same time, the novel suggests that storytelling can preserve traces of a community even as that community disintegrates. The many accounts of the Whatsitsname, Hadi, Elishva, and other characters keep their experiences in circulation, although those accounts remain incomplete and contradictory. Fragmented narration cannot restore the lost social order, but it can register the plurality of lives affected by violence. In this sense, the novel's form performs an act of ethical attention. By refusing to reduce the war to a single explanation, it acknowledges that lived experience is always distributed across many voices.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, fragmentation operates across physical, narrative, moral, and social levels, making it a comprehensive strategy for representing the realities of post-2003 Iraq. Through the dismembered body of the Whatsitsname, Saadawi visualises national collapse and exposes the cyclical nature of violence. Through fragmented narration, he challenges the authority of official histories and reveals the instability of truth. Through the creature's shifting identity and moral contradictions, he demonstrates how war unsettles ethical categories. Finally, through displacement and the erosion of communal bonds, he shows how violence fragments the social fabric of everyday life. While Bahoora, Hutcheon, and Booker and Daraiseh identify important dimensions of fragmentation in the novel, its significance lies in the way these dimensions operate together. The Whatsitsname's body, the novel's narrative form, and the damaged community are not separate symbols; they are interconnected expressions of the same historical condition. Saadawi's fragmented structure both represents and reproduces the uncertainty of war. It denies readers the comfort of a unified narrative because such unity would contradict the fractured reality the novel seeks to portray. Fragmented narration is therefore not merely effective but necessary for representing lived war experience. It enables readers to inhabit a speculative reality shaped by instability, incomplete knowledge, moral confusion, and loss. By making fragmentation the organising principle of both content and form, Saadawi shows that war is experienced not as a single, coherent event but as a series of broken bodies, memories, stories, and relationships

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Blackness and Physical Autonomy in Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation"

By: Serah Arabi

Whenever the grim realities and injustices within daily life are discussed, one would expect such topics to be approached with utmost seriousness. However, in Wole Soyinka's 1962 poem "Telephone Conversation", anti-Black racism is exposed through a single conversation incorporating casual, colloquial language. At the same time, this colloquial language is contained within a poetic structure, which propels the reader to confront the Black speaker's reality closely as he deals with racism. In his seminal essay *Art as Technique*, Viktor Shklovsky echoes Aristotle's idea that "poetic language must appear strange and wonderful" (7). When this idea is placed in the context of "Telephone Conversation", the "strange and wonderful" language of poetry is juxtaposed with the speaker's experience with anti-Blackness and racist hostility. By making use of this juxtaposition, the reader is shown an unusual outlook on racism, where the speaker's raw experience exposes its harshness, while the conventions of poetry maintain an aesthetic facade through devices such as visual imagery, metaphor and asyndetons for rhythmic effect. Shklovsky demonstrates that the purpose of art, such as poetry in this essay's case, is to enable one to "recover the sensation of life" and to "make one feel things" (2). Considering Soyinka's poem contextually, racism in 1960s Britain would have been far more normalised than in modern times, which makes the focus on the landlady's racism and the speaker's subsequent reactions all the more jarring. Therefore, this essay aims to examine how a seemingly normal experience like racism in 1960s Britain is deconstructed and, according to Shklovsky's idea, defamiliarised to the reader through the graphic description of skin colour. It further seeks to explore the role of poetic language as resistance and defiance to blatant anti-Blackness.

The beginning of the poem dramatises the build-up to the speaker's confession regarding his Blackness. As the poem starts with the speaker being "indifferent" to the apartment's "location" and finding its "price" being "reasonable" (Soyinka 1-2), he shifts towards a "self-confession" about him being "African" (Soyinka 4-5). The dramatic effect is evident in the shift between a semantic field of materialism to one of personal identity. Regarding the semantic field of materialism, the speaker deals with rather superficial matters such as property and commerce with the apartment's pricing and location, but highlighting his Africanness signals a jump to something more innate.

Moreover, these lines mimic the broken flow of a telephone conversation due to the caesura, and within a telephone conversation among strangers, there is always a pervading sense of unfamiliarity. Ironically though, the speaker's revelation of his Blackness to the landlady creates more tension than the previous unfamiliarity through which they were navigating their conversation. In other words, the more the landlady comes to know about the speaker, the less comfortable the conversation is, which completely subverts the expectations of a civil conversation, where one would expect both sides to be dignified. The notion of upholding conventions could be linked to Shklovsky's idea of habitualisation, as he opines that one's "habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic" (1). In this case, the "habits" in the "unconsciously automatic" area could be equated to the semantic field of materialism and the natural, conversational flow that accompanies it, which is then disrupted by the speaker's revelation of his Blackness. As Soyinka brings the speaker's fundamental identity into the picture, which may be "habitual" and deeply familiar to the speaker himself, it is perceived in the opposite way by the landlady. Thus, race and Blackness become central to the poem, around which Soyinka constructs and deconstructs perception.

While the speaker's Blackness serves as a central focal point and is initially dealt with in a tension-filled atmosphere starting with the landlady's "silence" (Soyinka 6), this Blackness is instead dissected further, often through unusual metaphors. For instance, the speaker counters the landlady's invasive probing about his skin colour with "plain or milk chocolate" (Soyinka 19), which playfully punctuates the absurdity behind her reducing him to "dark" or "light" (Soyinka 10) or "very dark" (Soyinka 12) or "very light" (Soyinka 18). Here, there is a deliberate contrast between the distaste and directness with which the landlady probes him, and his frisky response with chocolate types, for chocolate invokes ideas surrounding sweetness and delight. Indeed, the landlady's emphasis on skin colour is simplistic and reductionist, which propels her to view the speaker through the categories of lightness and darkness. This approach is reminiscent of Shklovsky's algebraisation, which is a "method of thought" that makes one view objects not in their "entirety" but merely as their outward "main characteristics" (1). However, instead of directly opposing this, the poem's speaker augments these categorisations through unusual metaphors like the chocolate comparison, which enables simplistic and bigoted perceptions surrounding race to be ridiculed. Additionally, it is notable that the landlady's questions about his skin colour are stylised in capital letters, which heavily contradicts the calm tone and feigned innocence of the speaker's counter question. The landlady's grotesque questioning may blaringly take up space with Soyinka's choice of capitalisation, but the ridicule posed by

the speaker's gentle "like plain or milk chocolate?" (19) defamiliarises the concept of skin colour by directly opposing the landlady's harsh, "algebraic" (Shklovsky 1) categorisation. In other words, the simplicity of the chocolate metaphor, especially in a loaded conversation about skin colour, exposes the ludicrousness of constructed concepts such as race and white supremacy. Although the placement of chocolate metaphors may seem jarring and absurd on the surface, it ultimately unravells the landlady's bigotry.

Such "algebraic" categorisations are not just isolated for the speaker. He directs the same towards the landlady, despite her not revealing anything about her identity, unlike the speaker, who reveals his Africanness earlier in the poem. Without seeing her, the speaker judges her to be "lipstick coated" (Soyinka 8) and possessing a "stench of rancid breath" (Soyinka 10-11) after her racism is exposed. As opposed to the landlady's insistence on adhering to the dark and light binary, the speaker uses a wider range of visual and olfactory imagery, by imagining her lipstick and breath alongside her possibly possessing a "long gold-rolled cigarette-holder" (Soyinka 8-9). The idea that the lady is a smoker who has "rancid breath" while being "lipstick-coated" further attests to a sense of staleness, impropriety and a lack of authenticity, unlike the speaker who declares his Blackness in the very beginning. Thus, while her questions about his Blackness and skin colour are rooted in disgust, the speaker thwarts such notions by portraying her as repulsive instead. Even though Shklovsky contends that art "removes objects from the automatism of perception" (2), Soyinka ironically uses the art of poetry itself to assert the speaker's perception regarding the racist landlady. In other words, where art is meant to redefine perception and reject automatism, Soyinka defies that idea by utilising poetic techniques such as unpleasant imagery to hit back at the crowd which subjects Black people to unfair and racist categorisations.

The defiance against the landlady's lazy colourism manifests itself further into the visual imagery employed by Soyinka from the speaker's point of view. Just as the speaker imagines the landlady by possessing an unpleasant demeanour through vivid descriptions about her breath and appearance, he does the same by dissecting his outward Blackness to question her colourist perceptions. By declaring himself to be facially "brunette" with his palms and soles being a "peroxide blond", the speaker applies a semantic field of hair colour to skin instead, which highlights the nonsensical imbecility behind racism. Moreover, by using the asyndeton "palm of my hand, soles of my feet" (Soyinka 29), alongside a startling mention of his "raven black" (Soyinka 32) bottom, the speaker audaciously leaves himself bare, which directly opposes how the landlady never reveals her true appearance. While it may signal the non-Black landlady's privilege, another reading directs towards how the speaker willingly goes into

graphic detail about his physical features as a response to her questions. This signifies his defiance by putting her in an uncomfortable position, which inverts power dynamics in the conversation. Soyinka uses a "unique semantic modification" (Shklovsky 7) when the semantic field of hair colour is used to describe skin colour, which not only upturns linguistic rules, but symbolically questions the racist normalcy of 1960s England. Additionally, the speaker is elevated from being merely a "dark" versus "light" category, into someone seen "in [his] entirety" with no signs of being "alter[ed]" (Shklovsky 2) to fit the reductionist binary of colourism.

Soyinka provides an outright view on racism, and by the usage of the poetic form instead of prose, the reader is compelled to examine this phenomenon closely. Shklovsky states that with the prose form, the object "fades" and may not leave a "first impression" (2), a result that is prevented with poetry due to its focus on content density. While one may "fail to hear the prose word in its entirety" (Shklovsky 2), the reader is confronted with the grotesque reality of racism in "Telephone Conversation" through rhythmic patterns, such as caesura and asyndeton, that enable the reader to linger on. Furthermore, the usage of unusual metaphors to vividly describe Blackness is a means of resistance in a society highly defined by colourist binaries. Instead of being relegated to a singular category, the poem's speaker diversifies Blackness through witty imagery not just to illustrate the illogicality behind racism, but to reclaim his identity.

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Sign, Author-Function, and the Collapse of Meaning in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

By: Yousef Abueida

Paul Auster's *City of Glass* presents a story about a man named Daniel Quinn, who writes detective novels under the name William Wilson. One night, he receives a phone call asking for detective Paul Auster, and he answers it twice with the second time saying he is Paul Auster and takes the case. What is strange about this moment is that the substitution costs him nothing and requires no internal negotiation. As the novel progresses, the narrative continues to question the cost of that easy substitution on meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign argues that meaning originates from the relationships between signs inside a shared linguistic system. Foucault's concept of the author-function, similarly, argues that the "author" is not simply a real individual but a cultural and institutional role that organizes discourse, controls interpretation, and assigns responsibility to texts. Taken together, both theories suggest that meaning depends on larger linguistic and institutional structures that organize how identity and discourse become legible in the first place. Reading *City of Glass* through the lens of these two theories reveals that Auster is examining the unstable structures that hold language together. As Quinn loses any stable identity as a speaker and writer, the novel gradually exposes how meaning depends on both shared systems of language and institutional forms of recognition that can quietly collapse. Through the novel's attention to repetition, substitution, obsession, and narrative failure, Auster reveals that language and authorship remain structurally dependent on systems of recognition that can continue functioning even after the subject they organize has effectively disappeared.

The borrowed name William Wilson reveals the instability of Quinn's identity as a writer because it places him inside another fiction before the plot itself begins to fragment him further. Early in the novel, the narrator describes how "Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books, and although in many ways Quinn continued to exist, he no longer existed for anyone but himself" (Auster 9). The phrase "no longer that part of him" shows that Quinn has not necessarily changed, but rather that something was removed from him. Identity here is treated as something divisible, meaning it can be subtracted from without disappearing entirely. What remains after the subtraction becomes a leftover self, essentially a Quinn who persists without the social function that made him clear and legible. When it says that "he no longer existed for

anyone but himself," it highlights how existence and recognition are splitting apart. Quinn is still physically present, but he cannot be read by anyone outside of himself. This state of existence is where Saussure's framework becomes visible, since Quinn has lost the community that gives signs their value. A sign that only one person can use is not really functioning as a sign because it is circulating meaning that no shared system can confirm (Saussure 263). Additionally, the concept of langue vs parole also sharpens this collapse by showing how Quinn is reduced to an isolated parole with no access to the shared system of langue that makes meaning socially meaningful (Saussure 272). When Quinn takes on the name Paul Auster, he is essentially borrowing a function he cannot sustain. Foucault shows that the author-name functions as a cultural device that classifies, limits, and gives status to meaning (359). Quinn steps into that function with no body of work behind him and no community to hold the name in place. The two theories press on each other here in a useful way: Saussure locates the problem in language itself, in the loss of the social system that stabilizes signs, while Foucault locates it in the institutional structures surrounding discourse. In the context of Quinn's collapse, the signifier is diminished because the community is gone, and the author-function fails because there is no subject left to perform it. What the disintegration of Quinn's names reveals is that identity in language was never private ownership to begin with. Once the structures holding the identity in place weaken, the person inside the name has nowhere left to stand.

As Quinn's unstable identity expands beyond himself, the scene where he meets Paul Auster the character explores the collapse of narrative difference when a name keeps functioning after the identity behind it has already broken down. Quinn visits Auster expecting the meeting to clarify something, but it only makes things worse. For instance, a part of the exchange goes like this:

> "I'm afraid you've got the wrong Paul Auster."
>
> "You're the only one in the book."
>
> "That might be," said Auster. "But I'm not a detective."
>
> "Who are you then? What do you do?"
>
> "I'm a writer" (Auster 146).

Every sentence in that exchange is short and declarative, and there is no moment where the syntax stretches to clarify the strangeness of what is happening. Two people are sharing a name and the narrative treats it with the same flatness it uses for the other parts of the story. That flatness is important because the scene should feel like a confrontation, a moment where the confusion of the preceding chapters gets resolved, and the narrative refuses to give it that weight. Instead, the sentences sit beside each

other with nowhere to go, each one asserting something that the next one quietly contradicts. Even the distinction between "detective" and "writer" is unstable, since both are versions of authorship, both are ways of organizing and interpreting the world through language. Foucault's point about subject-position explains the flatness of this scene because both Quinn and Auster are trying to occupy a discourse position that is structurally available but not privately ownable (361). When Quinn and Auster sit across from each other, neither can consolidate the function because neither of them has the institutional ground to claim it exclusively. Saussure makes this angle precise from a different perspective. In his system, signs get their value from their differences from other signs, and when two identities occupy the same signifier, that logic that produces meaning collapses (302). This scene is also where synchronic structure matters because within the system at this moment, there is no stable difference that allows "Auster" to function as a distinguishing sign (Saussure 272). The system needs contrast to work, and here the contrast is gone. What the scene reveals is that the author-function was secured by the system around that person, and when that system stops differentiating, the name becomes noise.

The red notebook is where the novel gets most precise about how language turns inward and consumes itself once it loses both its social ground and its institutional anchor. As Quinn retreats further from the world, his relationship to writing changes. The narration in Chapter Thirteen notes that "he began to weigh his words with great care, struggling to express himself as economically and clearly as possible," and shortly after that, "Quinn no longer had any interest in himself" (Auster 199). What emerges when reading those two observations together is that language is turning inward and consuming itself, essentially trying to survive on as little as possible. The phrase "as economically and clearly as possible" strips writing of everything except its bare function, and even that function has no one to receive it. The second part, "Quinn no longer had any interest in himself," removes the last possible audience for the notebook. He is writing for no one, not even himself, and the final line of the notebook makes this explicit, stating, "What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?" (Auster 200). The last sentence the notebook contains is a question about its own ending. Language has turned entirely back on itself, where it anticipates its own disappearance rather than reaching outward toward the world. As stated earlier, Saussure argues that signs only carry value through their relations within a shared system (302). Quinn's notebook is not a part of a shared system or community as it is addressed to nobody and is confirmed by nothing outside itself. It ultimately becomes a private parole with no langue beneath it. Foucault adds his institutional perspective by highlighting how

without an author organizing and limiting the text, discourse expands without restrictions and becomes unaccountable (370). However, the two frameworks pull against each other in an interesting way here. Saussure suggests the notebook fails because it is cut off from a shared system as the language collapses inward. Foucault suggests the opposite problem: without institutional limits, discourse does not collapse but spreads, growing more private and uncontainable with each entry. This tension also reflects Saussure's mutability vs immutability because Quinn tries to rebuild language internally, but cannot actually control how meaning shifts within or outside the system (263-264). Quinn's notebook is both shrinking toward silence and expanding into incoherence at the same time. That double movement is what makes it the novel's most disturbing image of what happens to language when all its support is removed.

As writing itself begins collapsing inward, Quinn's surveillance journey shows him trying to rebuild the structures of meaning from scratch. While following Stillman through the city, Quinn maps the old man's daily walks with obsessive precision. Eventually, he concludes that the routes form letters across the city grid and he "felt certain that he was looking at the letter 'E," and later identifies additional letters that eventually produce "OWER OF BAB," leading him toward "THE TOWER OF BABEL" (Auster 109-111). The emphasis on letters is important because letters traditionally mark the beginning of language itself, the smallest visual units from which systems of meaning are built. Quinn here is finding the formal markers of meaning itself, the signs that a system of language is organizing around something intentional. However, the narration never fully confirms whether the pattern is real or imposed. The story repeatedly undercuts Quinn's confidence by asking whether "the letters were not letters at all" and whether "he had seen them only because he had wanted to see them" (Auster 112-113). The refusal to distinguish between genuine pattern and projection is structurally significant as it shows that the novel withholds the one thing Quinn needs most, which is an authority outside himself that can validate what he sees. Quinn is trying to read Stillman's movements as a text, to find the intention behind his behavior, and to ultimately construct Stillman as an authorial subject whose actions carry hidden structure. Foucault's argument, however, states that the author-function requires institutional support to stabilize meaning (365). The author-function is not something one person can impose on another through their interpretation or will. Quinn has no access to those structures anymore, which means his reading of Stillman's walks cannot be confirmed by anything outside his own mind. Saussure presses on the same problem from a different direction by arguing that meaning depends on collective structures that confirm the connections between signs and signifieds (265). The failures identified by

both frameworks are real, but neither one alone is enough to explain what makes the surveillance journey unsettling. It takes both to account for the specific quality of Quinn's collapse, the way his precision and his paranoia become identical.

After Quinn's attempts to reconstruct meaning through interpretation fail, the ending of the novel shows the restoration of meaning and quietly shows that the restoration has arrived too late. A narrator who has not been present from the entire previous text appears in the final pages and explains that "the information has run out, and the events that follow this last sentence will never be known" (Auster 200-201). Shortly afterward, the narrator explains that Auster "had spent the last several months trying to track down Quinn, but with no success" (Auster 201). The phrase "the information has run out" is visibly procedural as it is the language of records and documentation, not emotional loss. The passive structure of "will never be known" matters because the sentence removes any identifiable subject who might recover the missing events. Nobody fails to know them and they simply become unknowable. The ending therefore shifts the novel away from mystery and toward absence itself. The narration continues speaking with confidence and authority, yet that authority can no longer produce access to Quinn. This structure is where Foucault's theory becomes especially visible. The narrator is doing what Foucault describes institutions doing to anonymous discourse: gathering fragments, establishing origin, and attempting to transform scattered writing into an organized narrative (368). The author-function is being performed on Quinn's notebook by transforming disoriented private writing into something that can circulate and be received. The narration, however, immediately reveals the limits of that process because Quinn himself cannot be recovered through it. In Saussurian terms, the signifiers remain present: Quinn's name, the notebook, the narration itself, but the stable signified that those signs were meant to organize has gradually disappeared (267). Together, the two frameworks reveal that the ending is exposing the instability underneath closure itself. The system of meaning continues functioning structurally even after the subject it was meant to stabilize has disappeared.

Auster's *City of Glass* ultimately reveals how meaning can continue operating even after the subject it was supposed to organize has disappeared. Through the novel's demonstrations of substitution, fragmentation, obsessive interpretation, and narrative collapse, Auster traces how Quinn's presence is maintained while his identity steadily loses coherence inside the systems meant to stabilize it. These shifts reveal how language and authorship depend on the social and institutional structures that determine what counts as meaningful in the first place. Saussure's framework makes this insight clearer by showing how signs require shared systems and collective recognition in order to

function at all. Moreover, Foucault's author-function explains how discourse is organized, classified, and stabilized through institutional practices. While Quinn's collapse within language and authorship was examined throughout the analysis, important components like the novel's detective form and postmodern narrative structure could be explored further to situate these problems within the reader's role as an interpreter. Auster's unsettling suggestion is that the systems sustaining meaning do not disappear when the subject at their center vanishes. They continue operating structurally, producing narratives, classifications, and interpretations long after the person they were meant to stabilize can no longer be fully recovered.

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Editorial Board

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The twelfth annual edition of ASRAR: Dialogues from the Diaspora has collected multimodal submissons from students across AUS. This issue's theme, 'The Absurd,' brings together various intetrpretations of the concept: from bizarre and unexplained occurances, to eerie and uncanny experiences. This theme tempts you to question our perceptions of reality, why we percieve them that way, and what it means for it to be different.

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